

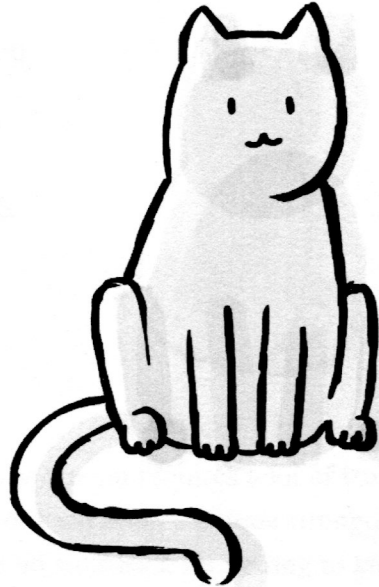


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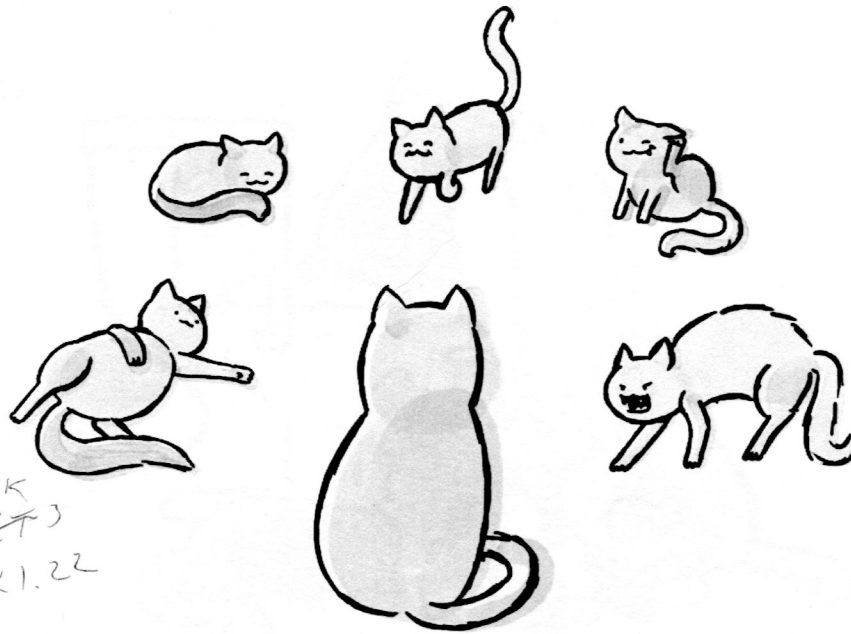
## Cat herding 101: A guide to leading creative teams for unofficial project leads.

*Seven principles to help make you more successful, told in cats.*

You might have the good fortune to work with an outstanding project manager. This is a guide for those who aren't so lucky, yet still find themselves building something creative on a team with ineffective or nonexistent official project leadership. If you find yourself in this position, the following principles will help you take the reins and lead your team to glory while avoiding critical mistakes.

### Principle 1: Understand Your Team

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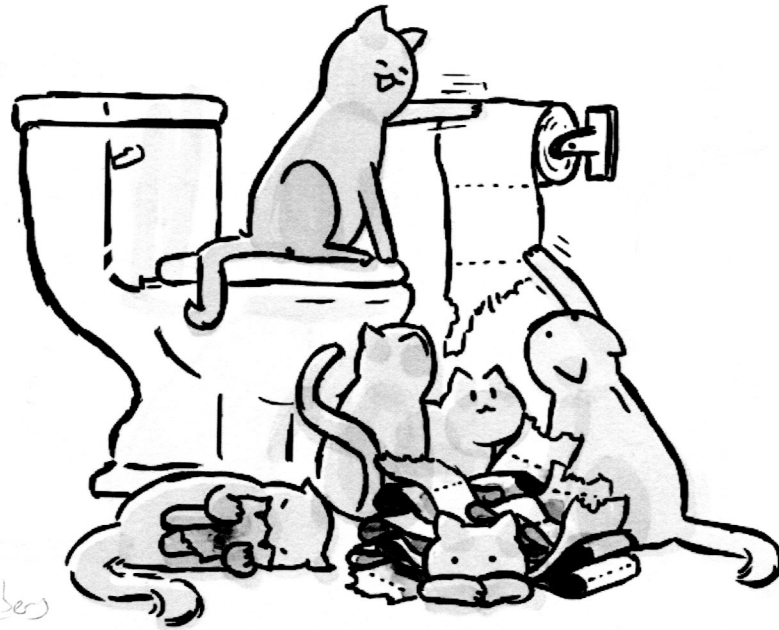
Building things as a team requires a lot of trust, which is rooted in an understanding of each other's unique strengths, weaknesses, and quirks. There is no substitute for getting to know each of your team members individually.

However, prior to getting to know your team, start with a set of positive assumptions about them to get the relationship started on the right foot. Assume your fellow team members are **smart and resourceful**, desire **ownership**, and are **committed to excellence**.

One secret to project leadership success is to do a great job managing the team's energy and morale. An excited, optimistic team is a team that has a much higher chance of success. Bring chocolate to meetings, call for stretching breaks when people get tired, and have an understanding of how each team member enjoys working best.

I recommend Dan Pink's TED talk on motivation or Chip & Dan Heath's book Switch if you want to learn more about driving people toward a goal.

## Principle 2: Facilitate Great Work



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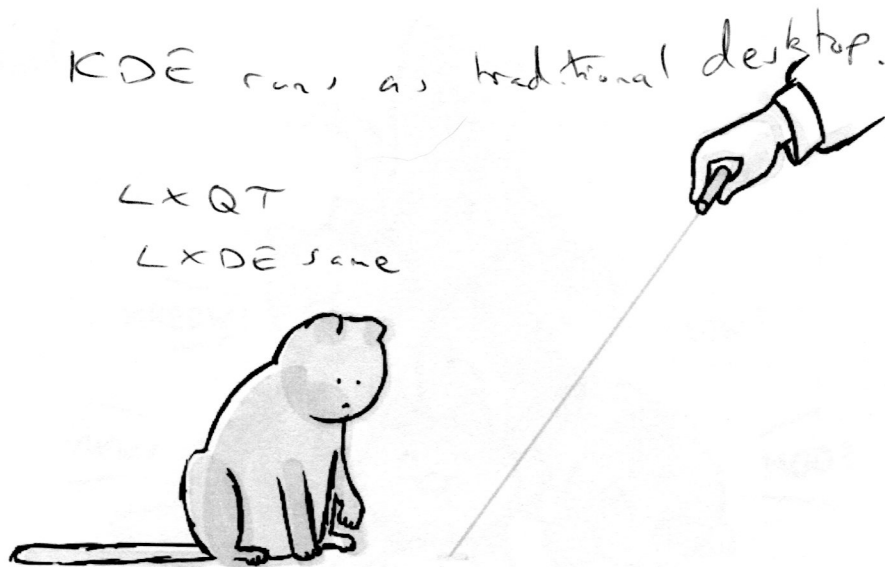
As a project lead, your job is not to *micromanage* the team. Your job is to **enable** them to do their best work. Micromanagement erodes ownership, while enablement through the removal of obstacles enhances it.

Part of facilitating great work means shielding the team from bad work. **Under-promise** and over-deliver to stakeholders to buy the team enough resources to do their best. **Don't solutionize** in front of stakeholders without first discussing what you're able to deliver on with your team. And finally, **be decisive** to prevent decision gridlock.

On a healthy project team, each team member supports the lead, and the lead supports each team member. Think of this as a symbiotic relationship which allows momentum, cohesion, and morale to build over time.

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### Principle 3: Focus On Getting Shit Done



macOS & Windows 10 are still traditional desktop environments.

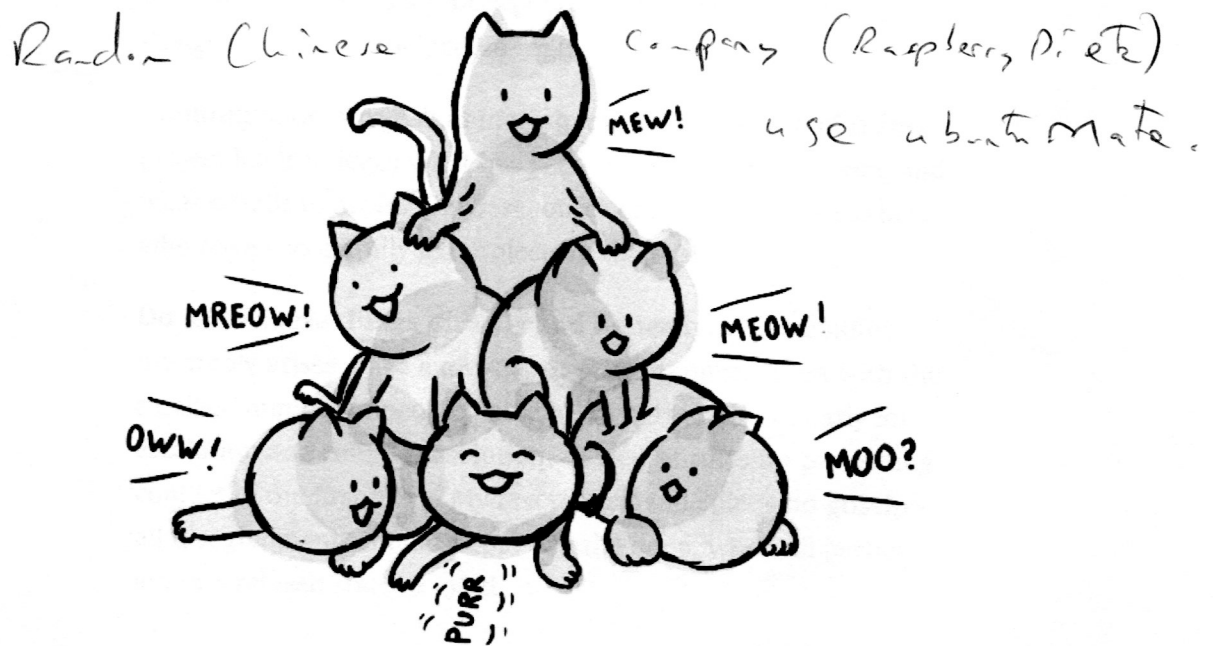
As a project lead, your single most important responsibility is to focus on the project goals over anyone's ego—especially your own.

Whatever it is, if you or your group has committed to it, then get it done **no matter what**.

As a team, make a commitment to avoid complaints and excuses, which are all distractions from getting shit done. Instead, make a decision as a group to be proactive, help whoever falls behind, and use "I will..." statements instead of "Someone should..."

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## Principle 4: Over Communicate



Your primary weapon against mismatched expectations, unexpected delays, and group conflict is better communication. In a perfect world, you'll always be able to get done what you set out to do. However, when the inevitable happens and there's no way to avoid missing a deadline, communicate this as early as possible to all relevant stakeholders.

As a project lead, get in the habit of over communicating. Here's a handy set of heuristics to ensure you have covered your bases.

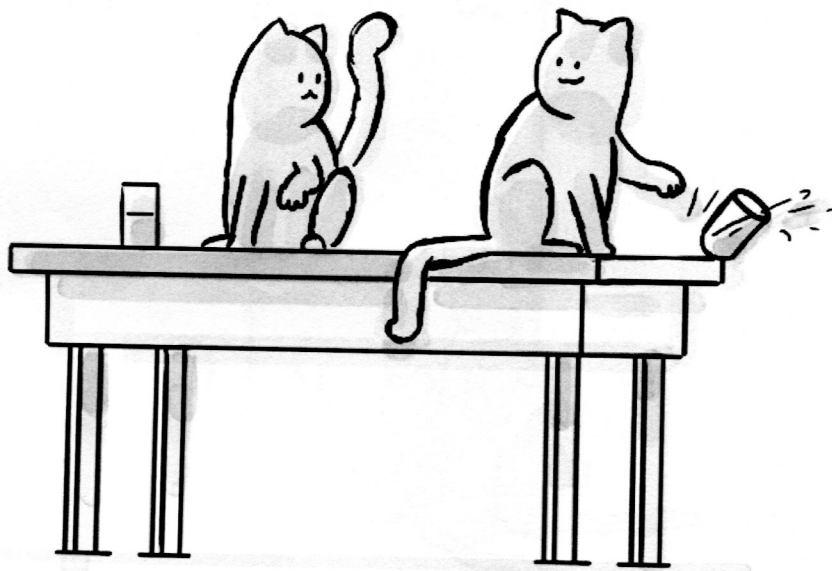
- **Communicate up:** Ask stakeholders what their expectations are for communication frequency, and diligently stick to that schedule. When it seems there might be a problem on the horizon, bring it up early and often. The only thing worse than a missed deadline is a missed deadline stakeholders didn't know about until the last minute.
- **Communicate down:** Communicate frequently with your team members, and provide a space where you can address their concerns and blockers. An effective tool is the daily standup, where team members meet at the same time every day, digitally or physically, to review what they have been working on, what they're going to work on today, and what blockers they have. Design critique is also an incredibly effective way to structure

work reviews, and is a process that I consider mandatory for design teams to participate in regularly.

- **Communicate out:** Ask as many questions as you can of fellow project leads to learn what has been most effective for them, and what pitfalls to avoid. The best source of information are others who have successfully led projects in the past.
- **Do all of these things directly and honestly:** When conflict inevitably arises, have a direct, but private conversation with the smallest number of people possible. Lay ground rules early for escalation and conflict resolution, as well as rules for preventing conflict in the first place. My favorite ground rule is **no gossip**—all disagreements should happen in the open, when all parties are in a relaxed state of mind.

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## Principle 5: Lead By Example



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Leading by example means being the team member you wish you had.  
Work hard, collaborate well, and take feedback without ego. If

everyone on the team is working tirelessly to build something incredible, it's easier to participate with gusto.

Good project leads also have the capacity to conjure a desirable future state, and to paint such a vivid picture of that state that the team can't help but get fired up. Take the time to think through and communicate your vision, and ask for input from team members who want to contribute to that vision. Establish milestones and metrics so the team is aware that you're making progress toward that vision.

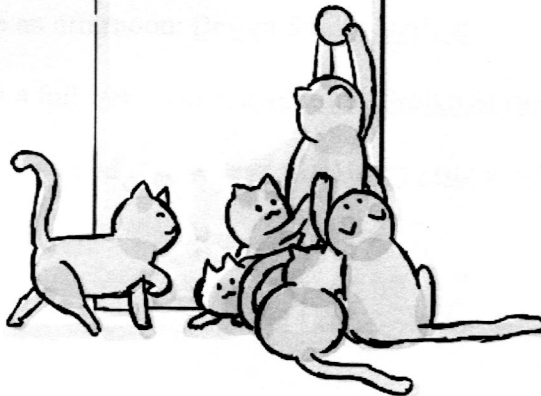
Finally, be the first to volunteer for the shit work (wait—you didn't think leading a project was going to be *fun*, did you?). This will help the team feel supported, protected, and inspired. It also makes it impossible for anyone to complain about tasks they consider boring.

Martin started on M.ate in 2013.

## Principle 6: Collaborate Better

archiving / accessibility slack

"Libra" company on pasthuck.



While collaboration feels like a meaningless buzzword, it's much more than simply working next to someone else. Every builder eventually



hits the ceiling of what they're able to build on their own, making collaboration essential to accomplishing Big Things.

Good collaboration is much more than loosely structured group brainstorm sessions or design-by-committee meetings, which are ineffective and damage trust on the team. Make sure that everyone on the team agrees to the principle that **good ideas can come from anywhere**. This fundamental belief prevents ego problems and confirmation bias, which so often derail collaboration sessions.

My favorite exercise is to **ask my team to try to get each other promoted**. When this mindset is adopted and everyone is putting the team's interests above their own, the project will be as successful as it can be. Ironically, this is a far more effective way to serve each team members' individual interests.

If you're new to collaborating with builders, pick a collaboration framework to guide your efforts. A good collaboration framework is one that allows input to come from anywhere, allows the team to influence the project direction while giving stakeholders the final say, and renews everyone's sense of ownership on the project. While the recommended frameworks below have "design" in the title, they are more effective when designers, engineers, marketers, growth, and company leaders are included.

*Recommended collaboration frameworks:*

- If you have an afternoon: Design Studio Method
- If you have a full week: Google Ventures Design Sprint
- Regularly scheduled review sessions: How to run a design critique

All except branding & welcome screen for Ubuntu Mate  
is a Debian.

## Principle 7: Party Harder

but (b) duplicates efforts of elsewhere





Just a few ~~the~~ fine things.

There are 3 simple things to keep in mind when dealing with success and failure.

1. **Give your team all the credit** for group successes, and do it publicly.
2. **Take personal responsibility** for any team failures, but give constructive criticism to relevant team members—privately—to help them avoid similar mistakes in the future. Delivered in the right spirit, constructive criticism can be one of the most effective learning tools.
3. **Throw a party** at the end of the project to provide closure, recognize above-and-beyond contributions from team members, and end the whole endeavor on a high note.

17.04 - EVERYONE MUST FILE BUGS

### Further Reading

These principles have been collected and pruned over the last 10 years by myself and my colleague Jake Fleming (who is also responsible for the amazing illustrations), where we lead the Product Design career accelerator program at Tradecraft. Here are some additional recommended resources if you want to master project leadership.

<https://bugs.launchpad.net/ubuntu-mate>